

A GOTHIC ROMANCE & DOLLMAKING EXPERIENCE

The Secrets of BLACKWOOD MANOR

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THE SECRETS OF BLACKWOOD MANOR

A Gothic Romance

Featuring Evangeline Blackwood

*"Old houses do not forget. They simply wait for someone willing to
listen."*

PROLOGUE

The Lady Who Vanished

In the autumn of 1871, a storm settled over Blackwood Manor and refused to leave.

For three nights rain beat against the tall windows, the chimneys moaned, and the woods beyond the iron gates bent beneath the wind. On the fourth night Lady Cordelia Blackwood climbed the great staircase carrying a single candle.

A footman saw her pause beneath her own portrait. A maid heard her footsteps continue toward the third floor. At half past midnight the housekeeper found the attic door standing open.

Cordelia was never seen again.

Her shoes remained beside her bed. Her cloak still hung in the entrance hall. No horse had been taken from the stable, no carriage had passed the gates, and every outer door was bolted from within.

Her father ordered the household never to speak of it.

The portrait was moved from the drawing room and hung above the staircase where Cordelia had last been seen. In the years that followed, servants began to whisper that the lady's eyes did not always look in the same direction. Some nights they faced forward. Some nights they seemed to turn toward the upper landing.

And on the coldest moonlit nights, a point of golden light appeared deep within the painted darkness behind her, as though someone were walking through the portrait with a candle in hand.

The Blackwoods called it nonsense.

The servants called it a warning.

The house waited.

PART I

THE STAIRCASE



The portrait watched. The candle led. The house remembered.

CHAPTER I

The Return

Blackwood Manor had been waiting.

Evangeline Blackwood returned to the manor on the last afternoon of October, beneath a sky the color of tarnished silver.

Blackwood Manor had always looked less built than summoned. Its chimneys rose like black fingers above the bare trees, and the stone facade seemed to absorb the weak daylight rather than reflect it. When Evangeline was a child, she had believed the house slept during the day and woke after sunset.

Years away had not cured her of the idea.

She stood beneath the porte cochere while the last of her cases were carried inside. The front doors opened before she could knock.

Mrs. Wren, the housekeeper, had grown smaller and whiter since Evangeline had last seen her, but her expression remained exactly the same: an efficient mixture of affection and disapproval.

"You have your grandmother's timing," she said. "Always arriving with weather behind you."

"I was hoping you would say I had improved."

"I have known you too long to lie on the doorstep."

Evangeline smiled and embraced her.

The smile faded as soon as she crossed the threshold.

The entrance hall smelled of beeswax, old roses, damp stone, and the faint mineral cold peculiar to houses that have outlived too many people.

Furniture stood beneath dust cloths in the adjoining rooms. The chandeliers were unlit. Somewhere deep in the house a clock ticked with slow authority.

Her grandmother had been dead for three months.

The will had left Evangeline everything: the manor, the grounds, the remaining furnishings, and enough debt to make the inheritance feel more like a dare.

"The solicitor wrote that a surveyor was coming," Evangeline said as Mrs. Wren led her toward the stairs.

"Not a surveyor. A restoration architect."

"That sounds more expensive."

"It usually is."

"Do I know him?"

Mrs. Wren's mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. "Adrian Mercer."

Evangeline stopped.

The name struck with absurd force.

Adrian had grown up in the gate lodge, the son of Blackwood's last estate steward. As children they had climbed the ruined orchard wall, stolen pears, mapped passages no one else remembered, and been scolded for leaving muddy footprints on carpets older than either of their families. At seventeen, Evangeline had believed they would remain inseparable simply because she could not imagine the world arranged any other way.

At nineteen, Adrian left without saying goodbye.

She had not seen him since.

"How convenient," she said.

Mrs. Wren glanced at her. "I did not hire him. Your grandmother did, six weeks before she died."

That was worse.

Evangeline looked up toward the staircase and found herself beneath Lady Cordelia's portrait.

The woman in the painting was younger than Evangeline remembered. Or perhaps Evangeline had simply grown older. Cordelia wore a dark gown, pearls at her throat, and an expression of quiet intelligence sharpened by something almost defiant. Her left hand rested upon the folds of her skirt.

On one finger was a small antique ring.

Evangeline's own hand rose to the pendant at her throat.

The pendant had belonged to her mother. Its tiny engraved setting held no precious stone, only a pale piece of moonstone veined with blue. Around it curled a delicate four-petaled design.

The same design surrounded Cordelia's ring.

"Was she wearing that before?" Evangeline asked.

Mrs. Wren looked up. "Wearing what?"

"The ring."

"Lady Cordelia has been wearing whatever the painter gave her for one hundred and fifty years. I should think she is unlikely to change now."

Evangeline almost laughed.

Then she noticed Cordelia's eyes.

They were not looking at her.

They were turned toward the stairs.

CHAPTER 2

Thirteen Chimes

A candle, a portrait, and an open door.

Sleep refused to come.

By midnight the manor had become a landscape of small sounds: old pipes cooling in the walls, wind moving beneath doors, branches touching glass. Evangeline lay in the bed that had once belonged to her mother and watched moonlight shift across the carved wardrobe.

At twelve twenty she heard a footstep overhead.

At twelve twenty-three she heard another.

The third floor was empty.

She sat up.

A practical woman would have remained in bed. A sensible woman would have rung for Mrs. Wren. Evangeline had spent enough of her childhood being described as neither practical nor sensible that she felt no obligation to begin now.

She slipped into her ivory nightgown, took the brass candlestick from the bedside table, and lit the candle.

The flame steadied.

In the corridor, the house seemed to draw away from it.

Evangeline descended one flight toward the main staircase. She did not know why she went down when the sound had come from above. Perhaps she wanted to prove to herself that the portrait was unchanged.

It was not.

Cordelia's face remained composed, but the painted eyes were lifted toward the upper landing.

Evangeline raised her candle.

"This is ridiculous," she whispered.

The portrait, predictably, offered no opinion.

A draft moved across her wrist.

The candle flame bent toward the stairs.

Evangeline followed.

Moonlight poured through the tall Gothic windows at the landing, silvering the carved banister and drawing the bare branches outside in black lace against the sky. Each step creaked beneath her. The great clock below began to strike midnight again, though she knew it already had.

One.

Two.

Three.

She stopped halfway up.

The clock continued until thirteen.

Then silence.

"Very funny," she said to the house, though her voice was not entirely steady.

At the third-floor landing she found a narrow corridor she had not walked since childhood. Portraits crowded the walls. Most were obscured by darkness, but one small oval frame caught the candlelight: a younger Cordelia, her hair unpowdered, a half smile at one corner of her mouth.

At the far end stood the attic door.

Evangeline remembered it as heavy oak with an iron latch.

Tonight it stood open by an inch.

The flame in her hand leaned toward the gap.

Something moved on the other side.

Not a footstep this time.

Fabric.

A soft dragging whisper, like silk being pulled across boards.

Evangeline reached for the door.

A voice behind her said, "I wouldn't do that."

She spun so quickly that hot wax splashed over the brass cup.

A man stood at the head of the staircase.

He was taller than the boy she remembered, broader through the shoulders, his dark coat damp with rain. His hair had been blown untidily across his forehead. But the grey eyes were the same.

Adrian Mercer looked from Evangeline to the open attic door.

"You always did choose the dangerous door," he said.

For several seconds she could not speak.

Then every unsent letter of the last years seemed to arrange itself into one cold sentence.

"And you always did appear after it was too late to be useful."

CHAPTER 3

The Man from the Gatehouse

Some silences are inherited. Others are chosen.

Adrian had arrived at Blackwood after midnight because a tree had fallen across the north drive.

That was his explanation.

Evangeline did not ask why he had climbed three flights of stairs before removing his wet coat.

They stood in the old morning room the next day with rain tapping the windows and a pot of coffee between them. Mrs. Wren moved in and out with the tactful noisiness of a woman determined to hear nothing and miss less.

Adrian spread architectural drawings across the table.

"The east roof is worse than I expected," he said. "There is water behind the parapet, and the third-floor joists have shifted. The attic should be avoided until I brace the north section."

"How fortunate that you happened to arrive precisely when I was about to enter it."

He met her gaze. "Fortunate for the joists. You were always hard on buildings."

"I was eleven."

"You tried to climb a chimney."

"You dared me."

"I was eleven too. My judgment was compromised."

The corner of her mouth betrayed her.

Adrian saw it. His own expression softened, then quickly became professional again.

He had changed more than she wanted him to have. There was a quietness about him now, a habit of looking at a room as though he could see the skeleton beneath the plaster. Yet when he leaned over the drawings, one hand braced beside hers, Evangeline remembered a summer afternoon in the orchard when he had caught her as she fell from a wall and neither of them had known what to do with the sudden closeness.

She moved her hand away.

"My grandmother hired you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she knew the manor was failing."

"That is not what I meant."

Adrian was silent.

Mrs. Wren set down a plate of toast with unnecessary emphasis and left.

"Your grandmother wrote to me in June," he said at last. "She said Blackwood would be yours and that you would need someone who knew the old construction."

"She spent years ensuring you stayed away."

His eyes sharpened. "Did she tell you that?"

"She did not have to. You disappeared."

"Evangeline..."

"No. You do not get to say my name as though it is an explanation."

The wind struck the windows.

For one reckless second she wanted him to argue. Instead he looked down at the plan.

"There are things I should have told you," he said quietly. "I was nineteen and proud and very easy to frighten when the threat was not to me."

"What threat?"

He did not answer.

Evangeline hated how quickly hurt could turn to curiosity.

She looked at the drawing beneath his hand.

"What is that?"

A narrow line ran between her bedroom and the old west wall, too thin to be a corridor and too deliberate to be decorative.

Adrian followed her finger.

"A service passage, perhaps. The original plans are incomplete. Blackwood was altered so many times that half its walls are lying about what they contain."

"You say that as if the house has a personality."

"You grew up here. You know it does."

The answer was so familiar that for a moment they were seventeen again.

Evangeline looked away.

On a side table lay her pendant where she had removed it while dressing. Adrian saw it.

He went still.

"Where did you get that?"

"My mother. Why?"

He lifted the pendant without touching the chain. "My father sketched this mark once. Four petals around a center stone. He found it carved behind a shelf in the west library. Your grandmother dismissed him three days later."

"For finding a carving?"

"He never told me the whole story."

Evangeline thought of Cordelia's painted ring.

Upstairs, somewhere beyond the ceiling, something thudded.

Both of them looked up.

"The attic?" she asked.

Adrian folded the plan.

"Whatever you heard last night," he said, "leave it alone until I can make the floor safe."

Evangeline nodded with the solemnity of a woman already planning to disobey.

PART II

THE ATTIC



Above the house, the forgotten things had kept their own history.

CHAPTER 4

The Open Trunk

Two old gowns. A blue velvet box. A name written too soon.

At eleven forty-seven that night, Evangeline found the attic door standing wide open.

She had not touched it since Adrian closed it the night before.

The sensible part of her mind observed this fact with admirable clarity. The rest of her stepped inside.

The attic smelled of dust, old cedar, cold iron, and lavender so faint it might have belonged to memory rather than air.

Her candle revealed steep rafters furred with cobwebs. Great travelling trunks crowded the walls. Chairs stood upside down upon tables. Portraits leaned in stacks, their gilt edges dulled by years of neglect. An arched window at the far end admitted a spill of moonlight, pale enough to make the room seem underwater.

Evangeline raised the candlestick.

A large black trunk sat beneath the left wall.

Its lid was open.

That alone was wrong.

Blackwood trunks were always closed. Mrs. Wren believed open trunks invited moths, damp, and moral decline.

Evangeline approached.

Inside lay two gowns.

They were not Victorian. Even in the weak light she recognized the wide court skirts, fitted bodices, lace flounces, ribbons, and delicate stomacher work of the previous century. One was faded rose silk, the other powder blue gone grey at the folds. They had been put away in haste rather than packed for display: sleeves tucked inward, skirts folded unevenly, lace caught between layers. A ribbon trailed over the edge.

Yet they were unmistakably dresses, not ruined heaps of cloth.

On top of the blue gown rested a small jewelry case covered in dusty powder-blue velvet.

Evangeline's pulse quickened.

She set her candle on the trunk's rim and opened the case.

Inside lay a broken chain, two pearl earrings, a spray of tiny seed pearls, and a ring.

The ring was narrow gold, old enough that the engraving had softened. Around its small moonstone curled the four-petaled Blackwood device.

The same as her pendant.

The same as Cordelia's painted hand.

Evangeline lifted it.

The candle went out.

Darkness rushed in.

She did not move.

Moonlight from the Gothic window silvered the trunks and the webs overhead.

A creak sounded in the rafters.

Then another, behind her.

Evangeline turned.

There was a portrait on the wall above the trunk.

She was certain it had not been there before.

Lady Cordelia Blackwood looked down from an oval gilded frame.

This Cordelia was younger than the woman above the staircase. Her dark hair curled loosely around her face. Her hands were clasped at her waist, and there was something almost anxious in her painted expression.

"Cordelia?" Evangeline whispered.

The darkness answered.

Then a woman's voice, thin as breath against glass, said, "Put it back."

Evangeline's fingers tightened around the ring.

"The ring?"

A pause.

"Not the ring."

The voice came closer.

"The dress."

Evangeline looked into the trunk.

The rose gown had shifted.

Beneath it, half concealed under the powder-blue skirt, lay a third garment: pale silver-blue silk, folded with unusual care.

Across its bodice rested a dried white rose.

And beneath the rose was an envelope.

The paper was yellow with age.

Across the front, in brown ink, were four impossible words.

FOR EVANGELINE BLACKWOOD ONLY.

CHAPTER 5

For Evangeline Blackwood Only

The dead do not always ask to be mourned. Sometimes they ask to be understood.

She did not open the letter in the attic.

Some instincts arrive too late to be called wisdom, but Evangeline was grateful for them anyway.

She tucked the envelope into the pocket of her robe, returned the ring to the blue velvet case, and relit the candle with shaking hands. When she looked up again, Cordelia's portrait seemed perfectly ordinary.

That was almost worse.

Evangeline carried the jewelry box from the trunk, then stopped.

"Put it back," the voice had said.

She set the box among the two rumpled court gowns and left the ring where she had found it.

On the landing Adrian was waiting.

He leaned against the wall with his arms folded, dressed but unshaven, looking furious in a way that made him appear younger.

"You promised."

"I nodded."

"That is generally understood to be agreement."

"Only among optimists."

He stepped toward her. "The north joist has split. If you had gone six feet farther left, you could have been on the floor below."

"Then I was very fortunate to go right."

"This is not funny."

"I know."

The answer stopped him.

Adrian looked at her face, then at the envelope in her hand.

"What happened?"

Evangeline wanted to say nothing. She had spent years learning not to hand people the fragile parts of herself. But the house had just whispered her name across one hundred and fifty years, and pride suddenly felt like a very small defense.

She gave him the letter.

They took it to her bedroom library, where moonlight touched the windows and a low fire burned in the grate. Adrian examined the seal without breaking it.

A B had been pressed into the wax, surrounded by the four-petaled emblem.

"Your family seal," he said.

"Cordelia's?"

"Probably."

"It has my name on it."

"I noticed."

"She vanished in 1871."

"I know."

"I was not alive in 1871."

"I am also aware of that."

"You are being remarkably calm."

"No. I am being quiet. They are different things."

Evangeline broke the seal.

The first sheet contained only seven lines.

My dear Evangeline,

If you are reading this, the house has chosen to remember what my family commanded it to forget. You will have found my ring, and perhaps you will believe the ring is the secret. It is not.

Find the blue book.

Read it before you return it to its place.

When the moon is high, the empty shelf will show you where.

C. Blackwood

Evangeline read it twice.

Adrian turned the paper over. "Nothing else."

"She wrote my name."

"Yes."

"You are still being quiet."

"Because every explanation I can think of is worse than the fact itself."

A reluctant laugh escaped her.

Adrian sat opposite her. The firelight softened the tiredness around his eyes.

"My father used to say Blackwood was full of locks that did not look like locks," he said. "Carvings, panels, false shelves. Your great-grandfather liked mechanisms. But some of them were older."

"Did he ever mention a blue book?"

"No. He mentioned a gap in the west shelves that could not be explained by the measurements."

Evangeline looked toward the tall bookcase covering the west wall of her bedroom.

One shelf held rows of dark leather volumes.

Near the top was a narrow empty space.

She had seen it all her life.

Until that moment she had never wondered why no book fit there.

CHAPTER 6

The Dusty Blue Book

A lock that did not look like a lock.

Morning made the impossible look merely eccentric.

The letter lay on Evangeline's writing desk beneath a paperweight. In daylight the ink was brown, the seal ordinary, the paper exactly as old as it claimed to be.

Adrian spent the morning in the attic bracing the broken joist. Evangeline spent it searching.

She began with her mother's cabinets, then the drawers of the writing desk, then the old cedar chest beneath the window. She found schoolbooks, dance cards, funeral notices, pressed violets, three unmatched gloves, and a packet of letters her mother had tied with pink ribbon and never sent.

No blue book.

At noon Mrs. Wren appeared with tea and watched Evangeline remove another shelf of volumes.

"If you intend to destroy the library," she said, "I would appreciate notice so I can go to the village."

"Do you remember a blue book?"

"There are several."

"Dusty blue. Old. Probably with gold lettering."

Mrs. Wren considered. "Your grandmother kept one in the locked cabinet in the morning room. She disliked anyone touching it."

Evangeline stared at her.

"You could have told me that an hour ago."

"You could have asked an hour ago."

The cabinet key was not on the household ring.

It was Adrian who found it.

He returned from the attic with dust in his hair and a smear of old plaster on one sleeve. When Evangeline showed him the cabinet, he crouched to inspect the lock.

"This is newer than the cabinet," he said.

"Can you open it?"

"With a key."

"You disappoint me."

He looked up. "You used to have higher moral standards."

"I used to have fewer haunted letters."

A memory surfaced: the blue velvet jewelry case, its lining divided into shallow compartments.

Evangeline was halfway to the door before Adrian stood.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the attic."

"Absolutely not without me."

She turned. "I thought the floor was dangerous."

"It is. That is why the person who knows where the joists are going with you."

They climbed together.

In daylight the attic seemed less supernatural and more intimate, as though the house had been caught without its stage lighting. Dust softened

everything. The two old court gowns lay as Evangeline had left them, loosely folded in the trunk. The powder-blue jewelry case rested between them.

She opened it.

Adrian touched the lining. "Here."

Beneath the velvet was a tiny raised edge.

He pressed it.

A false bottom lifted.

Inside lay a brass key no longer than Evangeline's smallest finger.

"A lock that does not look like a lock," she murmured.

Back downstairs, the key fit the morning-room cabinet.

The door opened with a dry sigh.

There was only one object inside.

A book bound in dusty blue leather.

Gold tooling curled around the cover. In the center, stamped in faded letters, were the words:

THE SECRETS OF BLACKWOOD MANOR.

Evangeline did not touch it at first.

"That is very direct," Adrian said.

"Perhaps Cordelia grew tired of subtlety."

"A useful family development."

She gave him a look.

He smiled.

It was the first unguarded smile she had seen from him since his return, and it did something dangerous to the room.

Evangeline looked back at the book.

"The letter said to read it before I return it."

Adrian's expression changed. "Then we read it."

"We?"

"Unless you intend to climb into another unstable room alone."

"That depends on how irritating you become."

"There she is," he said softly.

Evangeline felt the old summer between them flicker alive, impossible and warm.

She lifted the blue book.

PART III

THE BLUE BOOK



The missing volume was not merely a book. It was a key.

CHAPTER 7

Cordelia Writes Back

Every family record has margins. That is where the truth usually lives.

The first twenty pages were a disappointment.

Births. Deaths. Marriages. Land purchases. Repairs to chimneys. A quarrel over a boundary wall in 1812 that apparently required seventeen pages of righteous outrage.

Evangeline sat on the carpet before the library fire with the blue book open across her knees. Adrian leaned against the side of the sofa, reading over her shoulder.

"Perhaps this is the secret," he said. "Your family was extremely concerned about drainage."

"Be respectful. My ancestors suffered bravely through damp."

She turned another page.

The handwriting changed.

The formal family record ended abruptly. Beneath it, in a smaller slanted hand, someone had written:

If you have come this far, you are either a Blackwood or a thief. If you are a thief, close the book. There is nothing here you can sell. If you are a Blackwood, I am sorry.

Evangeline laughed aloud.

Adrian bent closer. "Cordelia?"

A single C appeared beneath the passage.

The pages that followed were not a chronicle.

They were a confession.

Cordelia wrote of Blackwood Manor as a beautiful cage. She wrote of a father who loved the family name more than the people carrying it, and of a marriage arranged to a man she described only as H, whose estate would have joined Blackwood's lands to the north.

Then, in the margin of a page dated April 1868, another name appeared.

Elias Hart.

He had been the younger son of the village doctor, educated beyond his prospects and employed for a time to catalogue the Blackwood library. Cordelia first noticed him because he reshelfed a book her father had deliberately placed out of reach of the women of the house.

I asked him why he had done it, Cordelia wrote. He said books were doors and he disliked seeing doors locked for foolish reasons.

Evangeline read the sentence twice.

Adrian was very still beside her.

"I like him," he said.

"You would."

The diary unfolded across three years.

Cordelia and Elias met in the library, then in the glasshouse, then beneath the yew trees after dark. He made her the blue book himself, binding blank pages between the family records so their letters could be hidden in plain sight.

He also repaired an old mechanism behind the west bookcase.

At the bottom of one page Cordelia had drawn a narrow shelf and a tiny four-petaled mark.

Evangeline looked toward the empty space high on the bookcase.

"That is it."

Adrian nodded.

They kept reading.

In June 1871 Cordelia's father discovered the courtship.

Elias was forbidden the grounds. Cordelia was confined to the manor.
The wedding to H was moved forward to November.

Her entries became shorter.

October 27: Father has locked the outer doors at night.

October 29: Elias says the old passage can still be opened from the west library if the book is returned to its place.

October 30: I have dreamed again of the girl with my ring. She has dark hair and carries a candle. I heard a name I do not know. Evangeline.

Evangeline stopped breathing.

Adrian read the line again.

"That is not possible," she said.

"No."

"You could make a more comforting effort."

"Would you believe me if I did?"

She shook her head.

The final diary entry was dated October 31, 1871.

Tonight I leave Blackwood.

If I fail, let the house remember for me.

If I succeed, let the next Blackwood woman who finds this book understand: duty without love is only another name for fear.

Elias will wait beyond the chapel passage until midnight.

I have put my ring in the attic with the gowns Mother saved from her grandmother. I leave it because Father watches my hands.

The blue book will open the way.

And if the girl from my dream ever reads these words, tell her this: do not become a ghost simply because your family prefers you quiet.

Evangeline closed the book.

The room was very silent.

Adrian looked at her, not the page.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"That is unconvincing."

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "You asked why I left."

The old wound opened so quickly she almost resented Cordelia for touching it.

"Yes."

"Your grandmother found us in the orchard that summer. She told me my father would lose the gate lodge and his position if I saw you again. She said you were going away to school and that, if I cared about you, I would make it easy."

Evangeline stared at him.

"So you vanished."

"I was nineteen. My father's health was already failing. I believed I was protecting him. And I believed..." He looked away. "I believed you would forget me."

"That was remarkably arrogant."

"I know."

"And remarkably stupid."

"Also true."

"I hated you."

His gaze returned to hers. "I know that too."

"No. You do not."

"Then tell me."

She wanted to.

Instead, the blue book shifted across her lap.

A small brass tongue slid from the top of its spine with a click.

Both of them looked at it.

Adrian exhaled.

"The book is the key," he said.

Evangeline rose.

"Then let us see what my family was so determined to lock away."

CHAPTER 8

The Empty Place

Return the book, and the wall will remember its door.

The empty place in the west bookcase was higher than Evangeline could comfortably reach.

Adrian offered to take the book.

She refused.

"Cordelia addressed the letter to me."

"And the shelf was built for someone six inches taller."

"Then Cordelia had an excellent sense of humor."

Evangeline gathered the front of her nightgown in one hand and stretched upward with the blue book in the other. Moonlight brightened the Gothic window behind her, catching the edges of her dark curls. The dusty blue cover stood out against rows of brown and black leather.

"By the spine," Adrian said. "The brass tongue has to face inward."

She adjusted her grip, thumb secure along the spine and fingers curved around the back cover.

The book slid into the gap.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the brass tongue met something inside the shelf.

Click.

A deeper mechanism answered from within the wall.

The bookcase moved.

Not much. An inch, perhaps two. Enough for cold air to spill through the seam.

Adrian took the carved edge and pulled.

The entire center section swung inward on hidden hinges.

Behind it was a narrow room.

No one had entered for a very long time.

Dust covered a small writing desk, two chairs, and shelves of letters tied with ribbon. A man's miniature portrait stood beside a dried white rose beneath glass. The painted face was handsome without being grand: dark hair, thoughtful eyes, an expression that looked almost amused.

"Elias Hart," Evangeline said.

Adrian lifted the miniature. "I think so."

On the desk lay a folded document.

It was a marriage certificate.

Cordelia Blackwood and Elias Hart had married privately on October 31, 1871, in the old Blackwood chapel, witnessed by the chapel keeper and Cordelia's maid.

"She made it out," Evangeline whispered.

Adrian found a packet of letters beneath the certificate.

The first was written from a town on the coast six weeks after Cordelia's disappearance.

I am alive, Father. I am married. I am happy. I know those facts will wound your pride, but I pray one day they may comfort whatever is left of your love for me.

The letters continued for years.

None had been opened.

Cordelia had written of a small house near the sea, of Elias's books, of a garden that refused to grow roses, of storms that made her remember Blackwood. She had written of returning once, secretly, after her father's death, to place the blue book and her ring where another Blackwood might someday find them.

The final letter was dated 1909.

Elias died this spring, she wrote. We had thirty-seven years. I would choose every difficult one again.

Evangeline pressed her fingers to her lips.

The ghost story she had known all her life had been wrong.

Cordelia had not vanished into the attic.

She had escaped through it.

"Why hide the truth?" Evangeline asked.

"Pride," Adrian said. "Fear. Control. Pick a Blackwood virtue."

She shot him a look.

"Present company excluded."

"Temporarily."

He smiled, but something in his expression was raw.

The hidden room was very small. They stood close enough that the sleeve of his coat brushed hers.

"Evangeline," he said.

"Yes?"

"I should have come back sooner."

The words were plain. That made them harder to defend against.

"Why didn't you?"

"At first because I was angry. Then because I was ashamed. Then because every year I waited made the next year harder." He looked at the unopened letters. "Apparently this house has a talent for that."

"For silence?"

"For turning silence into a tradition."

She lowered her eyes.

"I thought you left because I did not matter enough to make you stay."

Adrian's answer came immediately. "You mattered too much. That was the problem."

Her heart struck once, hard.

Outside the hidden room, wind moved through the library chimney.

"I do not know what to do with that," she said.

"You do not have to do anything."

"That is a very unfair thing to say after telling me."

"I have been unfair for years. I am trying a new method."

She laughed despite herself.

Adrian stepped closer, slowly enough that she could have moved away.

She did not.

"May I?" he asked.

The question undid what remained of her anger.

Evangeline lifted her face.

His kiss was gentle, almost cautious, and then not cautious at all.

Somewhere behind them, the blue book slipped deeper into the shelf.

The hidden door swung shut.

They broke apart.

Darkness swallowed the room.

Adrian rested his forehead against hers.

"I suspect Cordelia disapproves of timing," he murmured.

A soft click came from the far wall.

Evangeline raised the candle she had left on the desk.

A second door stood open.

Beyond it, a narrow stone passage descended into darkness.

CHAPTER 9

The Door She Chose

A love story hidden beneath a ghost story.

The passage beneath Blackwood was older than the manor above it.

Adrian went first, candle in hand, testing each step before Evangeline followed. The stone stair curved downward through the thickness of the west wall. Their shoulders nearly brushed both sides.

"This must run beneath the old chapel," he said.

"You sound pleased."

"I am an architect. Secret stairs are professionally exciting."

"You are impossible."

"You remembered."

She hid a smile.

At the bottom they found an iron latch.

It opened into the ruined family chapel at the edge of the west garden.

Moonlight poured through the broken tracery of the east window. Ivy had entered through the roof and climbed one wall. The old altar remained, grey with dust.

On the stone floor before it lay a small wooden box.

Inside was a ribbon, a dried sprig of myrtle, and a second copy of Cordelia and Elias's marriage certificate.

Beneath it was a note in Cordelia's hand.

If you have come this far, you know I was not taken by the house.

I chose my door.

The sentence seemed to echo in the empty chapel.

Evangeline turned toward Adrian.

"My grandmother chose for both of us," she said.

"Yes."

"And we let her."

He looked as though he might argue, then thought better of it.

"We were young."

"Cordelia was young."

"Cordelia had a secret tunnel."

"That does improve one's options."

Adrian's smile faded.

"What do you want now?"

It was not a question about the manor.

Evangeline looked through the broken chapel window toward Blackwood. From here the house rose above the trees, its windows black except for one pale square of light high in the west wing.

Her bedroom.

For months she had imagined selling the house because keeping it felt like surrendering to the dead. Now she understood that leaving for the same reason would be another kind of surrender.

"I want to restore it," she said. "Not as a shrine. Not as a monument to everyone who was miserable here. I want it lived in. Open. Warm."

Adrian's expression softened. "That will take years."

"You are the expensive restoration architect."

"I was afraid you had forgotten."

"I also want the truth about Cordelia put back into the family record."

"That may scandalize several ancestors."

"They have had a quiet century."

He laughed.

Evangeline stepped closer.

"And I want you to stop deciding for me what is best for me."

His laughter disappeared.

"I can do that."

"Can you?"

"I can try."

"Good."

She took his hand.

"Then stay."

He looked down at their joined hands as though he did not trust the sight.

"At Blackwood?"

"For the work. To begin with."

"To begin with," he repeated.

"Do not look so pleased. I have not forgiven you for being stupid at nineteen."

"I expect that will require extensive restoration too."

"Very extensive."

He raised her hand and kissed her knuckles.

The gesture was old-fashioned and entirely too effective.

From the manor, faint across the garden, a clock began to strike midnight.

One.

Two.

Three.

It stopped at twelve.

Evangeline listened.

No thirteenth chime came.

Above them the moon slipped free of the clouds.

When she looked again at the west wing, the pale light in her window was gone.

In its place, for one heartbeat, a tiny golden flame moved behind the glass of the great staircase.

Then it vanished.

CHAPTER 10

What the House Kept

Not every inheritance should remain unchanged.

The next morning, Blackwood Manor felt different.

Nothing obvious had changed. The roof still leaked. Dust still occupied several rooms with the confidence of legal ownership. The east corridor smelled faintly of damp plaster, and Mrs. Wren still considered open windows a personal insult.

But the house no longer seemed to be holding its breath.

Evangeline returned to the attic in daylight with Adrian beside her.

The portrait of Cordelia hung above the old trunk.

The two eighteenth-century gowns remained inside, rumpled but recognizable: rose silk and faded blue, lace and ribbons softened by age. The powder-blue velvet jewelry case rested between them.

Evangeline opened it and took out the ring.

"Do you think it belongs downstairs?" Adrian asked.

She considered.

"Not yet."

She placed it back in the velvet.

"Cordelia left it here deliberately. I think it should stay until the attic is restored."

"You are keeping the trunk?"

"Of course."

"It weighs as much as a small horse."

"Then you should be grateful it does not need feeding."

He shook his head.

On the way out, Evangeline paused beneath Cordelia's portrait.

The painted woman's hands were clasped quietly before her.

Her eyes no longer seemed to point toward the door.

They looked directly at Evangeline.

For the first time, Evangeline did not find the gaze unsettling.

"Thank you," she said.

Adrian waited until they were on the stairs before asking, "Did you just thank a painting?"

"Yes."

"Should I be concerned?"

"You are planning to spend years restoring a haunted house. Your standards for concern need revision."

At the west library, the blue book sat once more in its empty space.

Evangeline reached up and drew it out by the spine.

This time the hidden mechanism did not open.

Instead, a loose page slipped from between the final leaves and fell to the floor.

Adrian picked it up.

The writing was Cordelia's.

There was only one paragraph.

Evangeline,

If I dreamed you truly, then perhaps time is less orderly than Father believed. If I dreamed only the idea of you, that is enough. Every house has a room built from fear. Every family has a door they tell you not to open. Open it anyway - but choose what you carry out.

Below the words was a small sketch of a candle.

And beneath the candle, one final line.

Love should make a life larger, not smaller.

Evangeline stood very still.

Adrian read over her shoulder.

"That seems pointed," he said.

"She was a Blackwood. We are not known for subtle final remarks."

He touched the edge of the page. "Do you believe she knew your name?"

Evangeline looked toward the moonlit window.

"I believe the letter was waiting for me."

"That is not the same answer."

"No."

"Will I ever get the same answer?"

She turned to him.

"Probably not."

"Good. I was worried restoration might make you predictable."

Evangeline smiled.

Then she returned the blue book to its place.

The shelf clicked softly behind it, not opening now, only settling.

A secret at rest.

EPILOGUE

The Light in the Window

By spring, Blackwood Manor had scaffolding along the east wing, flowers in the morning room, and three rooms in which rain no longer arrived uninvited.

Adrian claimed this was progress.

Mrs. Wren claimed it was a miracle.

Evangeline claimed both men and miracles required supervision.

The story of Lady Cordelia Blackwood was copied into the family chronicle exactly as she had written it: not a disappearance, but a departure; not a tragedy, but a life chosen in defiance of one.

The dusty blue book remained in the west library.

Visitors often noticed it because its pale cover stood among darker volumes. No one could remove it unless Evangeline allowed them to. The brass mechanism, Adrian discovered, had a habit of locking itself at inconvenient moments.

He refused to call that supernatural.

Evangeline refused to call it anything else.

They were married the following October in the restored west chapel.

Evangeline wore Lady Cordelia's antique ring as her wedding band.

Just before midnight, after the last guests had gone and the manor had finally become quiet, she and Adrian stood together beneath the great staircase portrait.

Cordelia looked down from her gilded frame.

"Do you think she approves?" Adrian asked.

Evangeline studied the painted face.

"I think she has opinions."

"That is not what I asked."

"It is the most Blackwood answer available."

He laughed and drew her closer.

Moonlight crossed the landing.

For a moment a tiny golden point appeared in the darkness behind Cordelia's painted shoulder.

It brightened like a candle carried through a distant room.

Then it went out.

The house settled around them with a long, quiet sigh.

Blackwood Manor had stopped waiting.

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